

# The Best Thing We Can Do for Our Health

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Today is **World Sleep Day**, which is a good occasion for me to make a confession. I'd like to start by quoting Paul's letter to the Romans (7:15). As the verse is translated in the Christian Standard Bible translation, Paul wrote:

**For I do not understand what I am doing, because I do not practice what I want to do, but I do what I hate.**

It seems to me that Paul's confession is an apt expression of why I so rarely get a good night's sleep. Take yesterday and last night for example.

Yesterday I didn't have time (or make the time) to go on my morning jog because I had a long to-do list. Suffering an afternoon slump, I drank I double espresso at 2:45 p.m. Yesterday evening I attended a dinner party at which I ate too much and drank too much wine. After the party, I stayed up late reading a document on my laptop.

The aggregate of all of these actions wrecked my sleep last night. What is especially regrettable is that I *knew* these actions would wreck my sleep last night, but I did them anyway.

Dr. McCullough has occasionally given me a hard time about my lack of sleep hygiene, reproaching me along the following lines:

You wake up sleep deprived and the stress hormones kick in, so you drink enough caffeine to kill a Cape Buffalo, which produces more stress hormones. By the end of the day, you crave a few glasses of wine to settle the dust, which destroys your sleep architecture, and the vicious cycle repeats the next day.

In other words, like so many good things in life, consistently getting a good night's sleep is the hard-won result of **consistently practicing good habits**.

What are these habits?

- 1). Go to bed and rise at the same times every day.
- 2). Get at least ten minutes of sunlight as soon as possible after Helios rises.
- 3). Only drink coffee in the morning hours, preferably before 9:00 a.m.
- 4). Each day, prioritize doing the nagging and annoying things on your list. If you leave them undone, your mind will race around them at 3:00 a.m.
- 5). Exercise daily, preferably in the morning.
- 6). Take a Vitamin D supplement, especially if you aren't getting daily sunshine.
- 7). Cease looking at electronic, light-emitting devices after sunset.
- 8). Avoid heavy meals for dinner.
- 9). Avoid alcohol.
- 10). For at least a couple of hours before bedtime, do relaxing things like listening to classical music, playing an instrument, meditating, or reading an amusing book. Do not read or watch distressing things before bedtime.

I know that if I could just manage to follow this routine most of the time, it would do wonders for my mental and physical health. I suspect that most of the country would also feel a lot better if they did the same. Much of the crazy agitation that we see in the public forum today may be partly explained by the fact that 1 in 3 American are chronically sleep deprived.

Over the years I have contrasted my lack of sleep—the outcome of bad habits—with the sleep deprivation expressed in this famous LIFE magazine photograph of Dr. Ernest Ceriani.

After finishing a surgery that lasted until 2 AM, Dr. Ceriani stood exhausted in the hospital kitchen with a cup of coffee and a cigarette. "The nurses," LIFE noted, "constantly admonish him to relax and rest, but because they are well aware that he cannot, they keep a potful of fresh coffee simmering for him at all hours."



Dr. Ceriani was the sole medical doctor in 400-square mile region of rural Colorado in 1948. A general physician who was apparently motivated entirely by his desire to take care of people, his life was the subject of [a wonderful photo essay](#) titled *Country Doctor*, by W. Eugene Smith.

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